Iran Doubles Down in Venezuela

July 15, 2020 | Oved Lobel

Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro meets Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei in 2016

"We have seen an uptick in Iranian state-sponsored activity and liaison with Venezuela that has included [IRGC] Quds Force," said Admiral Craig Faller, head of the US Department of Defence's Southern Command, in May.

Since AIJAC first began covering (https://aijac.org.au/australia-israel-review/from-teheran-to-caracas/) the close ideological, political, economic, and military relations between Nicolas Maduro's Venezuela and Iran and its proxies in early 2019, the relationship has only deepened. The initial article, which appeared in the March 2019 edition (https://aijac.org.au/edition/ed-44-march-2019/page/2/) of the *Australia/Israel Review,* was prompted by a letter from Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah to Maduro, in which he offered military and security assistance to the regime, insisting it was only a "small part that [Hezbollah] can offer to President Maduro and to the memory of his predecessor, Hugo Chavez, in return for the support they gave Hezbollah and Iran, in terms of providing funds for the activity of [Hezbollah]."

Judging from recent reports, Iran and Hezbollah are today truly returning these favours with interest.

The uptick in Iranian activity in Venezuela began in April 2019, when Iran's Mahan Air, which is sanctioned by the US and banned by several European countries for providing "transportation, funds transfers and personnel travel" for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah, established a direct flight route between Iran and Venezuela. Not coincidentally, Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif reportedly offered (https://www.infobae.com/america/venezuela/2019/04/15/iran-le-ofrecio-a-nicolas-maduro-soldados-de-elite-de-la-guardia-revolucionaria-islamica/) more IRGC personnel to Maduro at the time the route was created.

As AIJAC noted (https://aijac.org.au/featured/aeroterror-reborn/) at the time, this was a re-establishment of the system known as 'Aeroterror, ' allegedly halted in 2010. Beginning in 2007, planes filled with drugs and cash – but no passengers – would fly from Venezuela to Iran and Syria and pick up IRGC and Iranian intelligence officers, as well as Hezbollah operatives, who would then be provided false documentation by Venezuela upon arrival, allowing them to establish themselves throughout Latin America.

Participating in and overseeing this program was Venezuela's current Minister of Petroleum Tareck El Aissami

(https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/21/world/americas/hugo-carvajal-maduro-venezuela.html), then in his role as Interior Minister, alongside several other powerful Venezuelan officials, many with family backgrounds in the Middle East.

Partially a result of simple corruption, but also as part of an alleged plan to bring IRGC and Hezbollah operatives to South America, the embassies of Venezuela in Iraq and Syria were handing out passports (https://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/08/world/venezuela-passports-investigation/index.html) and other documents to anyone who could pay. One of the actors in this sordid affair was the former Venezuelan chargé d'affaires in the Damascus embassy – and later Director of Political Aspects in Lebanon – Ghazi Nasr al-Din. Nasr al-Din was sanctioned (https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/hp1036.aspx) by the US in 2008 for assisting Hezbollah financially, politically and militarily alongside Fawzi Kan'an, another Hezbollah facilitator who used his Venezuelan travel agencies to support the group.

More than 2000 operatives linked to Iran and its proxies reportedly (https://www.voanews.com/americas/new-air-bridge-reflects-irans-growing-influence-venezuela) made it to Venezuela as a result of this program, according to analyst Joseph Humire, and "a steady stream of elite [IRGC- Quds Force] officers… took up positions in the Latin American country's intelligence service," says (https://www.foxnews.com/us/exclusive-venezuela-cancels-round-trip-terror-flight-to-syria-and-iran) former intelligence analyst Peter Brookes.

Hezbollah even reportedly established a base (https://en.radiofarda.com/a/would-a-new-venezuelan-government-kick-out-hezbollah-/29765060.html) in Venezuela's Margarita Island, where its operatives liaise with various regional narco-terrorist groups and drug cartels.

In May 2020, the US Justice Department charged (https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/former-member-venezuelan-national-assembly-charged-narco-terrorism-drug-trafficking-and) another Venezuelan official, former National Assembly member Adel al Zubayar, with acting as a Maduro regime point man in a 2014 attempt to recruit and train members of Hezbollah and Hamas with the specific intention of creating terrorist cells to attack the US. Zubayar fought for Hezbollah and Assad in Syria, and as part of this project to establish terrorist cells also imported weapons from the Middle East.

Since the US 'Maximum Pressure' sanctions campaign on both countries has intensified, its effects exacerbated by staggering corruption and mismanagement and the fallout of COVID-19, Iran has become far more prominent in several sectors of the Venezuelan economy, primarily food and petroleum.

In April 2020, the renewed 'Aeroterror' flights began flying in technicians, workers, and material to revive Venezuela's oil industry – controlled by El Aissami – which had completely collapsed (https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-23/venezuela-turns-to-iran-for-fuel-supplies-workers-amid-shortage?sref=YA6J9PJj). These constant flights (https://www.rferl.org/a/venezuela-receives-medical-aid-for-covid-19-patients-from-iran/30660436.html) also brought in COVID-19 tests and other medical equipment. The flights were then filled with gold bars (https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-30/iran-is-hauling-gold-bars-out-of-venezuela-s-almost-empty-vaults) from Venezuela's vaults, over 9 tonnes in April alone, and flown back to Iran as payment.

Iran then upped the ante by sending 5 tankers filled with about 1.5 million barrels of gasoline to Venezuela. The US sanctioned (https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1043#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20%E2%80%93%20Today%2C%20the%20U.S.%20Department,gasoline%20to%20the%20illegitimate%20Maduro) the captains of the ships but did nothing to impede them. Four more tankers are now on the way, although the US is attempting to seize (https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/legal-issues/us-moves-to-seize-iranian-petroleum-aboard-four-tankers-bound-for-venezuela-in-sanctions-escalation-push-to-extend-arms-embargo/2020/07/02/70ae590a-bad1-11ea-bdaf-a129f921026f_story.html) them and has reportedly disrupted transport as it seeks to pressure (https://www.aljazeera.com/ajimpact/squeezes-venezuela-oil-pressuring-maritime-companies-200713134430023.html) the entire maritime industry to cut off supply.

According to US prosecutors, the shipments are arranged by Iran-based IRGC middleman Mahmoud Madanipour. Opposition figures alleged the Iranians were also transporting material and men to set up a signals intelligence post for Maduro to intercept communications in the area.

In July, the *Wall Street Journal* reported (https://www.wsj.com/articles/iranian-military-owned-conglomerate-sets-up-shop-in-venezuela-11593972015?redirect=amp#click=https://t.co/qEmEMT4kow) that a massive Iranian supermarket was opening in Caracas in coordination with Maduro's emergency food program, "CLAP," which also functions as a money-laundering and sanctions-busting front, according to the US. The Iranian company running the food aid, Ekta, is subordinated to the Iranian Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces Logistics and completely intertwined with the IRGC. One Western intelligence official in the report claimed that Iran was also sending "military technicians" alongside its oil workers.

The CLAP program is overseen by Alex Nain Saab Moran, a "Colombian Businessman" intimately involved in all of the Maduro regime's criminal enterprises and corrupt foreign deals, including a food-for-gold program (https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-04-25/venezuela-turkey-trading-scheme-enriches-mysterious-maduro-crony) with Turkey that may also be linked to Iran's food program and even the "gas-for-gold" scheme that helped Iran bypass sanctions (https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/iran-turkey-gold-sanctions-nuclear-zarrab-atilla/549665/) until 2014. Saab's partner in negotiating (https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-08/maduro-said-to-tap-sanctioned-dealmaker-to-ship-gold-to-iran) both of these deals with Iran and Turkey was none other than Tareck El Aissami. Not surprisingly, Saab has also allegedly been linked (https://panampost.com/sabrina-martin/2018/10/17/us-israel-and-colombia-seek-maduro-frontman-with-hezbollah-ties/?cn-reloaded=1) to Hezbollah. He was recently arrested (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-corruption-idUSKBN23K0OT) in Cape Verde en route to Iran, and the US and Venezuela are currently battling (https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/the-battle-for-alex-saab-s-extradition-in-cape-verde/1906677) over his extradition.

In February 2020, the US accused (https://globalnews.ca/news/6509636/venezuela-project-canadian-man-charged-iranian-government-money-laundering/) Iranian-Canadian Bahram Karimi of involvement in the "Venezuela Project," a sanctions-evasion scheme involving the Iranian billionaire Najed family, high-ranking Iranian officials and the Venezuelan government. Iran's use of Venezuela to launder funds and circumvent sanctions is nothing new, but the increasing Iranian presence in what's left of the Venezuelan economy will likely provide it even more opportunities.

Already in 2013, former US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega told the *Washington Free Beacon,* "It's easy to say billions have been laundered through various Iranian enterprises and institutions through the Venezuelan economy. The Iranians have seized on this as a way to evade sanctions," and warned (https://freebeacon.com/politics/the-iran-hezbollah-venezuela-axis/) that the Iranian and Hezbollah role would only increase under Maduro. This has proved prescient.